

How the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can engage with religion

*International and local development institutions are increasingly acknowledging the importance of religion in their work but the question of how to engage with religion still remains unclear. **S  verine Deneulin** and **Augusto Zampini-Davies** argue that there is a method for engagement. Here they discuss what lessons we can learn from the international dialogue facilitated by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development on Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si*.*



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One year ago, the world state leaders gathered in New York to adopt the **Sustainable Development Goals**. **Indicators** to measure progress towards achieving the goals have now been agreed. The SDGs, in contrast to the Millennium Development Goals, are underpinned by a holistic understanding of development, and are the results of global participatory processes which reflect people's values. With **84%** of the world's population estimated to be affiliated to a religion, international and local institutions are increasingly acknowledging the importance of religion in their work. **DFID**, **UNICEF**, **UNFPA**, **UNDP**, to name a few, have established clear partnership guidelines with faith communities. However, what engaging development and religion means, and how it should be done, remains unclear.

During the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2015 in West Africa, national governments and international actors **were slow** in recognising the significance of religious actors in addressing the outbreak. A **report by Christian and Muslim organisations** highlights that religious leaders were able to change messages of fear, based on mere biomedical information from international agencies, into messages of hope and compassion that matched technical and religious perspectives. Due to the trust people have in imams and priests in the region, communities were ready to sacrifice some practices related to burials, such as washing bodies. Unfortunately, the connection between development actors and religious leaders was not as straightforward and as fast as it could have been. More lives could have been saved.



This is one example among many that reveals that engaging religions with development unavoidably brings the questions of when to engage, with what, and with whom. Does one always need to engage development policy and religion whenever religion is part of the fabric of a given society? If so, with which religious networks or organisations or individuals? With its recognised official representatives, or with ordinary members of the religious tradition? And which religious rituals, dogmas, texts, or beliefs should one engage with? Answering these questions is context-dependent. Engaging development and religion to contain the Ebola epidemics, for instance, is different from the engagement to stop a harmful environmental practice like **dynamite fishing**.

Despite this context-dependency, we argue there can be a method for engagement built on what we call an 'inductive-dialogical step' that can yield some unexpected results.

Between October 2015 and September 2016, the UK **Catholic Agency for Overseas Development** facilitated an international dialogue with its partner organisations in Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Kenya, Colombia, Bangladesh, and its stakeholders in the UK, on Pope Francis's encyclical ***Laudato Si' On the Care of our Common Home***. The document engages development and religion on matters which affect the life of humankind in its common home, the earth, and invites every single person on the planet to engage in a global dialogue on how to build a new model of development so as '**to leave no-one behind**', to paraphrase the SDGs mantra, while caring for the future of the planet.

The dialogue was conducted in the form of workshops, and took the methodology of *Laudato Si'*, 'see-judge-act', which is characteristic of the **Catholic social tradition**. Participants were first invited to 'see' what is good in their societies, and what they 'see' as damaging the 'seen' goodness, particularly in the name of development. They were then asked to revisit Pope Francis' 'judgement' on what hinders and promotes development, and then to provide their own judgement. Finally, participants reflected on what they believe they ought to do differently and what resources they would need to take action. They were finally invited to give thanks for the ecosystems that enable life in this planet to develop, and to celebrate God's gift of creation.

The findings are very rich. Some notable highlights are the differences regarding the 'judgement' about 'what hinders' and 'what helps' development. For example, while Pope Francis is concerned with the global ethical problems behind technological development, participants accentuate the advantages of technology for the poor. While Pope Francis sees politicians as key drivers for change, participants are far more sceptical about their roles, especially due to corruption in their political contexts. Where the Pope underlines the structural issues behind urbanisation and violence, participants focus on the day-to-day problems city dwellers suffer due to insecurity and violence, and on the opportunities that cities provide to fulfil people's dreams. Another example is about culture. Participants agree with and add to the Pope's analysis of the devastating effects of a consumerist and individualistic culture. However, they stress gender equality as an absolutely vital element for sustainable development and integral ecology, a topic absent from *Laudato Si'*. There are also some notable findings regarding 'action'. Unanimously, participants stress the need of slowing down the pace of life in general, and development in particular. For them, we all need more time for personal and community reflection on how to relate to each other and to nature; and more time for contemplation, in order to re-define our priorities, plans and development programs so they can be more sustainable.

There are two major lessons we can learn from this global exercise of engaging religion and development. The first one is the urgency to start thinking about development, including economic development, from the reality of people's lives and contexts. Not from ideology, but from what people experience, and what they judge as hindering or helping a good (hence sustainable) life. The second lesson is about engaging development and religion through a true dialogical process. Not one in which people come to the table with their positions to find common agreements, but a genuine exchange of experiences and viewpoints so that unexpected insights and actions can unfold. As the Pope said in his **address to the UN General Assembly** last year, 'Human beings who are easily discarded when our only response is to draw up lists of problems, strategies and disagreements' have to be the priority. When the experiences of real human beings are brought to the fore, some priorities and actions may be identified that had not been thought of by any

particular party before. This is close to what Amartya Sen, **when addressing a more economic oriented audience**, calls public reasoning processes.

The CAFOD engagement exercise on *Laudato Si'* led, for example, to the recognition of the close connection between respect for the earth and respect for every human being, particularly the poor, marginalised or relegated, a large number of which include women. This could change not only some development policies underpinned by Catholic movements or agencies, but also some religious practices of this particular religious tradition in terms of technology, urbanisation, or gender equality. Finally, the engagement exercise led to all participants stressing the need for more time to contemplate nature, vital for sustainable development. This is an action that every person can take irrespective of beliefs and cultures. How much time people spend contemplating nature per week could well become the 170th indicator of the SDGs, or maybe even its number one?

About the authors



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